



The Horse-Riding and Target-Shooting Contest for Lay Officials (drung 'khor rtsal rgyugs): Reflections on the Military Identity of the Tibetan Aristocracy at the Beginning of the 20th Century

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The Horse-Riding and Target-Shooting Contest for Lay Officials (*drung 'khor rtsal rgyugs*): Reflections on the Military Identity of the Tibetan Aristocracy at the Beginning of the 20th Century

- 1 Till the 1950s, all new lay officials (*drung 'khor*) of the Tibetan central government or Ganden Phodrang (Dga' ldan pho brang) had to take a compulsory examination upon entering government service. This examination was meant to test their ability in horse riding and target shooting with different weapons –matchlocks or rifles (*me mda'*),¹ arrows (*mda'*), and lances (*mdung*)– while riding from a distance. This form of evaluation and contest, named *drungkor tseggyü* (*drung 'khor rtsal rgyugs*), which literally means “examination of the lay officials’ skills” (hereafter the Test of Skill), continued to be held until the very end of the Tibetan central government. The lay officials, mostly aristocrats,² who took the exam, had to train in advance for a few months since, most of the time, they had never practised, much less needed, such skills. It was considered by many officials as obsolete, a kind of irrelevant continuation of the past. While investigating the education of the lay officials and the associated Test of Skill, certain salient questions arose: why did such an exam still exist at a time when a major proportion of lay officials were never appointed to military positions ? More curious still, given that those who did enter the army at the time did not use arrows and lances anymore, especially at the end of the period, what relevance could such an exam have had ? Such questions prompt us to broaden our approach to the Test of Skill and to tackle the relationship between the nobility and their probable former military identity. More specifically what light does the Test of Skill shed on the interaction between the army and the aristocracy ? Two important questions will be therefore addressed in this paper: first, did the Tibetan aristocracy still have a military identity at the end of its existence during the first half of the 20th century ? Secondly, what does this horse riding and target shooting contest tell us about the relationship between the nobility and this questionable military identity ?
- 2 The sources used to investigate the subject are mainly written biographical and autobiographical materials (published in the Tibet Autonomous Region and in India), oral accounts by aristocrats themselves (interviewed in Lhasa, India, the United States and Canada), and British archives.
- 3 To begin with, we will see that, during the first half of the 20th century, the Tibetan aristocracy was mainly an administrative elite and can therefore not be described as exercising a “defensive function” at this time, to use the concept applied by Georges Dumézil to Indo-European societies.³ However, as we will show in the second part, there are still indications of a privileged relationship between the aristocracy and the army; lastly, we shall propose that the relationship goes back to a former period of history and that the Test of Skill is very indicative of this complex relationship between the Tibetan aristocracy and a likely past military function.

The Tibetan aristocracy during the first half of the 20th century: a non-“defensive function” or identity

- 4 Although a few aristocrat families were aware of the ennoblement of an ancestor following an act of military bravery,⁴ the pillar of the lay Tibetan aristocracy and of the lay officials’ identity was not a military one during the first half of the 20th century. This notion of a military identity was in fact so alien to the aristocracy that in 1931 the idea of creating an elite regiment called the *drongdrag magar* (*grong drag dmag sgar*) partly made up of sons of noble families led to a general outcry among the aristocracy.⁵ As a matter of fact, the project was the idea of Kunphela (Kun 'phel lags 1905-1963), the then favourite of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, who

wanted to increase the efficiency of the army. In particular, the prohibition on new recruits sending servants as replacements gave rise to general discontent. The actual proportion of noblemen in this regiment is not clear from the sources, but it is likely that they, like Taring (Phren ring) or Yuthog (G.yu thog) for instance, only provided the regiment with officers.

5 On a general level, one cannot describe the aristocracy of this time as having a military function in Tibetan society: only a small number of officials of the Tibetan government served in the army in the course of their career, the army being one career opportunity among many others. According to the reconstruction of the careers of 441 aristocratic officials born between 1860 and 1941,⁶ only one in six served in the army in his lifetime and only 14 percent of all government positions were held in the army. Nonetheless, like the position of Finance Secretary (*rtsis dpon*) in the Finance Office and Treasurer (*bla phyag*), the highest official positions in the army, General (*mda' dpon*), and also of course that of General-in-Chief of the army (*mda' spyi*), were considered as a stepping stone from which one could be elevated to the post of Cabinet Minister (*bka' blon*).⁷

6 Also, in the second part of the period under study, after 1924, the military career was not a favoured one, since it bore a higher risk of being demoted than the other civil domains of activity.⁸ Fathers would hence be somewhat reluctant to let their sons engage in a military career.⁹ The main reason was that a group of young noble military officers favoured the modernization of the army and were thus associated with the progressive political wing which was set aside after the crisis of 1924.¹⁰

7 Moreover, even if the majority of the army highest officers were aristocratic lay officials, military careers were not reserved for them, since monk officials (*rtse drung*) could and did occupy these positions, even at the highest level. For instance, the highest position of General-in-Chief of the army was jointly held after 1934 by a lay official and a monk official.¹¹ They had the rank of *dzasa* (*dza sag*) and were assisted by a lay official of fourth rank and a monk official of fifth or sixth rank.¹² In the same way, the financial administration of the army was under the responsibility of two military paymasters (*phogs dpon*) of fourth rank, one lay and the other a monk.¹³

A privileged relationship between the aristocracy and the army

8 In spite of a strong emphasis on a “non-defensive function,” there is still clear evidence of a privileged relationship between the aristocracy and the army during the first half of the 20th century. First of all, the Tibetan aristocracy held a *de facto* monopoly on the highest officers' positions in the army hierarchy. When they were appointed to the army, aristocrats directly got officers' positions, regardless of their amount of previous military experience. These positions of command were regarded as equivalent to any other civil charge since there was no or a very low specialization among government officials.¹⁴

9 Let us observe the hierarchy of the military leaders, officers and non-commissioned officers and their social recruitment, during the first half of the 20th century. Recruitment to the highest officers' positions (i.e., the post of General-in-Chief of the armies and General) was restricted to officials of the government, lay or monk, and mainly lay aristocrats. The General, a fourth rank official, was in charge of a regiment (*dmag sgar*) of five hundred soldiers.¹⁵ The number of Generals kept rising with the size of the Tibetan army after the beginning of the 18th century, when there was only four of them, one for the Ü (Dbus) and three for the Tsang (Gtsang) region, and until the 1950s: in 1751 another General position was added for the Ü and during the second half of the 19th century, another one for the Tsang in Dingri (Ding ri). Thus, until 1913, there were six of them: two in Lhasa (*Dbus mda' dpon*), and four in the Tsang area (*Gtsang mda' dpon*): two in Shigatse (Gzhis ka rtse), one in Gyantse (Rgyal rtse) and one in Dingri.¹⁶ After 1913, several other positions of General were created, two for the Dalai Lama's bodyguard (*sku srung dmag sgar*), located at the Norbulingka (Nor bu gling ka), the Dalai Lama's summer palace, with one thousand men, one for the elite regiment *drongdrag magar*, created in 1931, two for the regiment located near the Drapchi factory (*gra bzhi dmag sgar*)

near Lhasa and one or two others for regiments stationed on the eastern border.¹⁷ In 1950, the number of Generals was extended to 17.¹⁸

Recruitment to the less important positions, which one might call “non-commissioned officers,” was open to commoners who were no officials but who belonged to a kind of middle class from which the clerks (*las drung*) in the fortresses or district headquarters (*rdzong*) and the managers of the noble estates were also chosen. In the positions of Colonel (*ru dpon*), of the fifth rank, usually commanding two hundred and fifty soldiers,¹⁹ there were aristocrats and commoners.

The position of Captain (*brgya dpon*), of the sixth rank, commanding 100 or 125 soldiers, was intermediary in the sense that it is reported by informants to have been filled only with commoners,²⁰ although there is one known case of a nobleman who held it.²¹ Captains were apparently allowed, as well as the higher ranking officers, to wear the long turquoise earring (*sog byil*) which was a sign of belonging to the Tibetan government service, whereas the lower ranking army positions, Sergeant (*lding dpon or zhal ngo*),²² of seventh rank and commanding 50 or 25 soldiers, and Corporal (*bcu dpon*) commanding 10 soldiers were filled only with commoners and they were not allowed to wear the long turquoise earring.²³

According to Hugh Richardson, head of the British Mission (Indian Mission after 1947) in Lhasa from 1936 to 1950 and a renowned Tibetologist, “what might be described as the equivalent of warrant officers were drawn from the same stratum of society as stewards of estates or by promotion of able ordinary soldiers. They were the backbone of the army because the higher-ranking officers were appointed from among the lay officials of the noble class who often had no military experience.”²⁴ Indeed, our database confirmed that most of the aristocrats who were appointed as General had never held a position in the army before;²⁵ the vast majority of the Generals held their first and last military position in this office.

It is important to insist on the de facto monopoly of the highest positions by the aristocracy, since it is likely that it was not a legal or an official government position. In fact, the army was, in theory, the domain where meritocracy was the most relevant in the government.

According to Luciano Petech, before the creation of a standing army under Pholané (Pho lha nas 1689-1747, r. 1727-1747), the army leadership who supervised the militia (i.e., regional levies summoned when an emergency occurred) was always chosen among “the more well-to-do families.”²⁶ But it seems that in the last part of the 18th century, there was an attempt to increase the professionalism of this Tibetan army and its meritocratic principle. Article 5 of the 1793 Twenty-Nine-Article Ordinance for the More Efficient Governing of Tibet reads as follows:

[...] All these officers (*mda' dpon* [General], *ru dpon* [Colonel], *brgya dpon* [Captain]) will be selected from capable young men [*mi na gzhor rtсал ldan sha stag 'dem sgrug*] and be appointed by the amban and the Dalai Lama, who will confirm the appointments with certificates. To fill a vacancy of a *mda' dpon's* post, a *ru dpon* will be promoted; to fill that of a *ru dpon*, a *brgya dpon* will be promoted. Servicemen of noble origin can only be promoted step by step, from *lding dpon* [Sergeant] to *brgya dpon* and to higher ranks, and they cannot be promoted more than one grade at a time. In former times, commoners were not allowed to be promoted to a post higher than *lding dpon*. From now on, they shall be promoted according to their knowledge, ability, and meritorious military service, and discrimination against them is not allowed. Those who violate military discipline will be punished severely.²⁷

And indeed, in the beginning of the 20th century, we find commoners occupying the Captain and Colonel (*ru dpon*) positions, but not at the position of General and General-in-chief of the armies. It is likely that the privileges of the aristocracy in the army, the fact that only noblemen would be appointed at these two highest officers' positions was not a legal one but just a customary unspoken law.

Although the study of the aristocratic officials' careers displays on the whole no specialization, as already mentioned, it is worth noting that a few individual aristocrats and sometimes even families specialized in army service. To give a few examples, Changra Wangchuk Tarchin (Lcang ra Dbang phyug mthar phyin 1878-1939) held three out of his seven positions in the army,²⁸ Drumpa Namgyel Gyeltsen (Brum pa Rnam rgyal rgyal mtshan 1898-1930) four out

of five.²⁹ Regarding family specialization, the Prince Peter of Greece noticed that the Surkhang (Zur khang) had a strong military identity,³⁰ but it was also the case of Ragashar (Rag kha shag), Sampho (Bsam pho), Treling (Bkras gling) and Leding (Lha sdings) families, which all included at least three Generals during the period under scrutiny. Similarly noteworthy is the fact that the higher-strata aristocracy (only 13 percent of the noble families) was overrepresented at this highest position of General (39 percent) and General-in-Chief of the army (55 percent).

The Test of Skill: its symbolic function, a continuation of the past ?

- 17 All new lay officials, mostly aristocrats, had to go through this compulsory examination of shooting with different weapons from a galloping horse.³¹ At the beginning of the 20th century, the contest would be organized anytime in spring or summer every five or six years, in order to gather a sufficient number of new lay officials, usually around thirty, who were still enrolled at the finance bureau's school for officials (*rtsis khang bslob grwa*) or who had already been appointed to a charge. It would take place near the aristocratic Lalu (Lha klu) mansion. According to one informant, contestants had to ride three times, in front of the Ministers (*zhabs pad*) and the Finance Secretaries (*rtsis dpon*): the first time just galloping, the second time shooting arrows at the three targets (*rgyang 'ben*), and the third time using the three different weapons for each target, first the arrow, second the musket and third the spear, a short one they had to throw at the target. Participants would be divided in two teams or "wings" (*ru*) according to the ancient military system and the final selection would be made by team and individually. At the end, they would be ranked according to their success in the contest and receive an auspicious scarf (*kha btags*).³² Those who failed the test had to retake it.
- 18 According to descriptions given by some aristocrats, the contest was an important moment in every lay official's life. When young officials were due to take the test, they went every day to the Changdzö Lingka (*phyag mdzod gling ka*), a park which belonged to the Labrang Changdzö (*bla brang phyag mdzod*), in order to train. The training period lasted at least one month and often three months.³³ Each wing would invite family and friends to attend the contest. Long-distance shooting (*rgyang mda'*) with bow (*gzhu*) and arrow would also be performed by participants. Each lay official had his own weapons and costume and would keep them very carefully after the contest, as tokens of good luck.³⁴
- 19 When was this made a preliminary test for young lay officials ? Its origin could not, unfortunately, be thoroughly ascertained. The taste for marksmanship competition was widespread in Tibet and certainly dates back to very ancient times. One informant thought the Test of Skill dated back to the first period of the administration of Ganden Phodrang, to the 17th or the 18th century,³⁵ and another suggested more precisely the period of the Seventh Dalai Lama,³⁶ but no evidence of its precise origins could be found. We can only underline similarities between this official contest and other known events.
- 20 First, the Test of Skill was closely linked in place, in content and maybe sometimes in period of the year – a point that will be discussed later – to another ceremony, the "Gallop behind the Fort" or *dzonggyap shambe* (*rdzong rgyab zhabs 'bel*).³⁷ It also took place until the 1950's, but yearly, during the secular festivities following the Great Prayer (*smon lam chen mo*), which were organized from the 22nd to the 27th day of the first Tibetan month. In his study of these secular festivals, Joachim Karsten describes their historical origin:

In order to show his appreciation of the fact that the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682) gained power over the whole of Tibet thanks to the military help of the Oyirad-Mongols under their chief Gušri Qan (1582-1655), the Fifth Dalai Lama established the custom of the parades of Gušri Qan's troops, who would appear before the Dalai Lama for inspection during the annual *sMon lam* festival. In time it became the duty of every high ranking government lay official (*śod druñ*) to provide cavalry men, selected from among the servants of their estates, for the New Year's parades.³⁸

- 21 These troops of cavalymen (*rta dmag*) and foot-soldiers (*rkang dmag*) would take part in military parades in 17th century clothing.³⁹ The generalship of the annual show was taken over

in turn by two fourth-rank noble lay officials and this very costly office, termed Yasor General (*ya sor khri pa*) or Chikyab yasor (*spyi khyab ya sor*), was compulsory for them. According to the tradition, they represented the leaders of the two wings of Gushri Khan's army.⁴⁰

22 Among these festivities, one event in particular is of certain interest here, the Gallop behind the Fort, because of its link to the Test of Skill. The Gallop behind the Fort presents a number of similarities with the Test of Skill, but it also contains significant differences in terms of regularity, competitors' status, and costumes.

23 It was organized on the 26th day of the first month, also in front of the house and parks of the Lalu family, behind the Potala. Two wings of cavalry, led by "fighters" of the noble houses of Doring (Rdo ring) and Samdru Phodrang (Bsam grub pho brang), also took part in a ceremonial horseback target-shooting contest.⁴¹ The history of both aristocratic families is strongly linked to the 18th century: the Doring family counts among its ancestors the famous Doring Pandita (1721-1792) who administered the Tibetan government in 1750 and 1751, and the Samdru Phodrang family is the ennobled family of the Seventh Dalai Lama.⁴² According to Donald LaRocca, who bases his judgment on photographs, "the style and type of the equipment of the participants of the 'Gallop behind the Fort' suggest that the standards or regulations governing it were established in the seventeenth or eighteenth century."⁴³

24 The Gallop behind the Fort has been described by several authors. In *Ceremonies of the Lhasa Year*,⁴⁴ and also in a report written in March 1947 (British archives, IOR), Hugh Richardson says that riders had to shoot from a galloping horse on two consecutive targets, first with a rifle and then with a bow and arrow.⁴⁵ Joachim Karsten's account also mentions only these two weapons.⁴⁶

25 If we compare Richardson and Karsten's descriptions with the Test of Skill, the lance is missing, but it might be a simple omission, since LaRocca's depiction of the equipment of participants in this ceremony, based on photographs taken precisely in the 1940's, comprises the usual three types of weapons.⁴⁷ Moreover, according to Richardson, the Test of Skill took place at the same time and place as the Gallop behind the Fort, as he adds at the end of his account this later event:

On the same day, in a remote part of the plain, further to the north, young lay officials who have recently been given a post or who have received promotion hold their own competition, the Trunkhor Tsegyu, in shooting arrows from horseback at targets like those of the Dzonggyap Shambé [Gallop behind the Fort], away from public gaze.⁴⁸

26 Richardson witnessed these ceremonies at the end of the 1940's, but his account is corroborated by an earlier description written by an aristocratic official and Finance secretary named Shugupa (Shud khud pa 'Jam dbyangs mkhas grub 1904-1991). In his autobiography, Shugupa describes his participation in the Gallop behind the Fort and his taking part in a test in front of the Dalai Lama and the Cabinet in 1923. The description includes shooting at three different targets:

I was nearing the age of twenty. My wife stayed on alone at Gawo while I travelled to Lhasa at the government's request to participate with other young staff members in horse racing, shooting, and archery contests as part of our New Year's festivities. [...]

These shooting contests are a popularly attended event held outside Lhasa on a vast plain set with tents and booths for spectators. Wearing armor, we mounted our favorite horses and one at a time galloped past the hanging target to shoot into the bull's eye⁴⁹ with our matchlock guns. The guns were then exchanged for bows and arrows, and another target was approached. Finally, a third target was aimed at with a spear. All of this was accomplished while riding on horseback at breakneck speed. [...]

For four months prior to the events, my friends and I—along with many other young men—practiced riding and target shooting with our guns, arrows, and spears. We also practiced long-distance archery from a standing position. On the first day of the fifth month of practice our skills were tested in the area south of the Norbulingka Palace. The Thirteenth Dalai Lama came to watch, along with his Cabinet, Parliament, and all the high-ranking officials of the government, who acted as judges. There was a preliminary rehearsal exhibition; then two days later the performance took place before the public as part of the lengthy New Year's celebration.

Though I was out of practice, having neglected this training during my governorship, I hit the targets, placing twenty-sixth out of a field of sixty contestants. On my return to my district, my

secretaries and assistants gave me a congratulatory reception. Every afternoon and evening that spring and summer we enjoyed parties involving games of archery.⁵⁰

27 The last part of this description, recounting how their skills were tested in front of the government, as a rehearsal before doing it in front of the public (i.e. the Gallop behind the Fort) could correspond to the Test of Skill. It could be inferred from the account that, when the compulsory contest was organized, every few years, it took place just before the Gallop behind the Fort and the riders of this last event were, partly at least, composed of the new officials having just passed the test.

28 But other evidence leads us to refute this link between the Gallop behind the Fort and the Test of Skill. According to one informant, the two events were not organized together, not only because the Test of Skill took place only every few years, but also because they were, despite striking similarities, completely separate events. Participants would be of different status: although the two main heads of the Great Prayer's lay ceremonies, the *yasor* Generals, were lay officials, the riders and archers during the Gallop behind the Fort would rather be clerks (*las drung*) of the government and professional archers and not only officials as in the Test of Skill. Also, the costumes would be different for the two events, the riders in the Gallop behind the Fort wearing hats with red tassels and helmets whereas the lay officials who competed in the Test of Skill would wear special leather helmets, said to be of Mongol origin.⁵¹

29 There were also other competitions of marksmanship in Lhasa and in other places, sometimes with only one or two weapons, like the yearly competition of gun and arrow shooting at Gyantse.⁵² These competitions were not at all the preserve of the aristocracy, and were also a customary entertainment among villagers.⁵³

30 The three weapons used during both the Test of Skill and the Gallop behind the Fort, i.e. the matchlocks, bow and arrows, and the long spear, were the standardized set of equipment of the Tibetan armoured cavalry, probably as stipulated by the central government of Tibet from the mid-17th or 18th century onward, according to Donald LaRocca.⁵⁴

31 LaRocca furthermore underlined a similarity between the Gallop behind the Fort and the celebrations held in 1694 to mark the completion of the Potala, which are depicted on murals decorating the walls of the Fifth Dalai Lama's chorten Hall in the Potala Palace:

In it riders gallop past a target and shoot arrows at it, followed by riders armed with matchlocks, who shoot at the same target as they ride past it. As mentioned previously, a version of this event continued well into the twentieth century as part of the Great Prayer Festival in Lhasa.⁵⁵

32 The exercise was apparently slightly different, but there are reasons to believe that the necessity for lay servants of the government to prove their ability in military skills dates back at least to this time.

33 Let us now turn to the evolution of the Test of Skill during the period under scrutiny. This examination seems to have been a remnant from the past, and certainly a fading one. Indeed, this test evolved as it came to be organized less and less frequently during the first half of the 20th century, to reach an interval, at the end of the period, of ten to even twelve years.⁵⁶ For this reason, some lay officials working for the government before the end of the Ganden Phodrang had never taken this ritual examination. On the 11th May 1938, the British attended the ceremony and commented on it:

It is said that the exam's goal is to test the rider's abilities of all Tibetan officials who enter the Government service and that it is compulsory. Each official has to take it after he has entered the Government service. Since there are only six or eight entries every year in the government and since the last course took place ten years ago, it is said, there was this time fifty-four low ranking officials, and most of them were young men.⁵⁷

34 According to one informant, the exam again took place in 1949 with 35 officials,⁵⁸ but we do not know if it was again organized later. In his book on the history of Tibet, the financial secretary Shakabpa (*rtsis dpon* Zhwa sgab pa Dbang phyug bde ldan 1907-1989) recalls, about the Test of Skill:

These skills were exhibited before the cabinet and the people. For quite some time, these abilities had been obsolete. Once new sorts of weapons were introduced, there was little purpose in learning

to use the weaponry from a former time. Thus, in 1928, the Treasury office proposed a new plan in which from that time on, when the skills of lower ranking secretaries were being tested, they would have to shoot while standing, clear guns, shoot while lying down, and shoot and assemble loose guns and machine guns, instead of the traditional tests. When the plan was considered, the representatives did not adopt it for the time being. There were difficulties because many civil and military officials questioned it.⁵⁹

35 This fact probably also explains why the frequency of the test suddenly decreased during the first half of the 20th century: the government members hesitated between modernizing an obsolete element of the administration and sticking to the tradition. The competition was meant for the sport and the prestige, as a former official recalls.⁶⁰ But the choice of continuing to organize the test was most likely connected to its symbolic function as a link between the aristocracy and Tibetan history and more precisely a glorious military heritage.

36 Indeed we have seen several elements underlining such a link. The whole yearly State secular ceremonies headed by the *yasor* at the end of the Great Prayer, and the Gallop behind the Fort, in particular, where aristocratic lay officials play a pre-eminent role, tend to identify the 20th century noble administrative elite with the 17th century Mongol armies and to recall the founding moment of Tibet central government after the unification of Tibet in 1642 by military means. Interestingly, according to tradition, in the Test of Skill cavalymen also represented the warriors of the mythical warrior figure of Gesar of Ling.⁶¹

37 Aristocrats would become the medium of military or martial historical evocations of a past, even a mythical past, with which they were identified and of which they were the heroes. The blurring or the competing interpretations of the actual origins of these ceremonies, with elements recalling Gesar, the Mongols, the 17th and the 18th centuries, only shows that the main point is not about commemorating one particular historical event, but more about how it links the actors, here the lay officials, to Tibet's glorious past. One cannot but speculate whether or not these ceremonies did contribute to the legitimization of the 20th century aristocracy domination by symbolically restoring their former more warlike identity. In any case, these State ceremonies and public spectacles were intended to display the aristocracy's physical abilities, superior skills, and prestige.

38 Even though it faded over time, this could be one reason for the persistence of these ancient and traditional ceremonies as well as in the taste for archery displayed during the summer picnics and parties by a number of Tibetans, but especially aristocrats.⁶² The policy of military development led by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, the resulting increase in the number of high ranking military positions available for lay officials or aristocrats, as well as the association of the young army officers with the progressive political wing of the government, might well have fostered a kind of conservative backlash and a desire to return to their origins for a part of the Tibetan aristocracy during the first half of the 20th century.

39 In conclusion, over the period under scrutiny here, the Test of Skill was maintained but both its organization at rarer intervals and its being called into question could reflect the closeness and the tension at the heart of the relationship between the Tibetan aristocracy and a former military identity. The question is still open as to what extent the identity of the aristocracy can be described as a military one during the different periods of the past. Although the search for a defensive function of the Tibetan aristocracy in early Tibet remains hypothetical, several works on the Tibetan Empire (7th-9th centuries) tend to show that clan chiefs and aristocrats had a clearer defensive function during this period than later on.⁶³ Much later, in the 17th century, it seems likely that the incorporation of the local chieftains (*sde pa*) in the newly created administration of the Ganden Phodrang played an important role in the shifting of their identity from a more defensive one to an administrative one. These developments seem to follow well-known trends of other aristocratic groups in other cultural areas and periods,⁶⁴ where the aristocracy's identity becomes more linked to birth than to its military profession and the army becomes a profession with only a marginal link to the aristocracy. This configuration in 20th century Tibet surely started at least during the transformation of local chieftains into government officials in the mid-17th century. Future research will hopefully shed light on the phases of this trend.

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Notes

- 1 According to Donald LaRocca, firearms were gradually introduced to Tibet from the 16th century onward from several places (China, India, Western Asia, when the use of firearms was widespread across Asia), but there is no proof of the use of firearms in central Tibet before the end of the 17th century. In Europe, such firearms were used between the 10th and the 17th century, being above all an infantry weapon, whereas in Tibet and Central Asia, they were fired from horseback in the way that bows were used, see LaRocca 2006, p. 198.
- 2 The officials of the Ganden Phodrang were either lay, mostly recruited from the aristocracy, or monks, recruited in the monasteries.
- 3 Dumézil identified in all Indo-European mythologies a common ideal organization of society, with a division of functions among three different groups: at the top of the social hierarchy, those who were specialists of the sacred, then those who mastered military arts and then at the bottom those who worked to produce food for the community, see Dumézil 1968.
- 4 For the modern period, a well-known case of such ennoblement is that of Tsarong (Tsha rong Zla bzang dgra 'dul).
- 5 Taring 1986, p. 133, and Goldstein 1993, p. 152.
- 6 A prosopographical study was conducted for my PhD (Travers 2009) on the Tibetan aristocracy and a database was filled with elements concerning the careers of these officials, with a total of 1210 positions: 49 percent of the charges were held in the central administration, 33 percent of them in the territorial administration, 14 percent of them in the army and for 2 percent in the "House of the Dalai Lama."
- 7 This was first observed by Luciano Petech (1973, p. 14) and proved to be accurate after examination of my career database, see Travers 2011.
- 8 Travers 2009b, p. 375.
- 9 Interview with the late Bdud 'dul mnam rgyal or George Tsha rong (1920-2011), Dehra Dun (23/08/2003).
- 10 In 1924, an incident (the stabbing of a policeman by two soldiers and their subsequent punishment by amputation on the orders of the Commander-in-Chief of the army) led to a conflict between the "military clique" and the government. Many Tibetan military officers were dismissed or demoted. The direction of Tibet's political development was reversed and the program of modernization of Tibet ended, see Goldstein 1993, pp. 121–138. See also McKay 2003 for a discussion of the crisis.

- 11 Petech 1973, p. 12, and Williamson 1934, p. 4.
- 12 Dge rgyas pa 1988, n° 3, p. 132.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- 14 Travers 2011, p. 167.
- 15 One source says 1000 men, see O'Connor 1903, p. 41. Indeed, in some regiments like the bodyguard regiment, with 1000 soldiers, there was only one was General seconded by a Colonel.
- 16 Bell 1906 and Petech 1973, p. 12.
- 17 *Ibid.* and Goldstein 1968, p. 213.
- 18 Khreng ping 1981, p. 184.
- 19 Petech 1973, p. 12.
- 20 *Ibid.* The status of the Captains is not so clear: Captains as well as Sergeants and Corporals do not feature in the 1924 list of government officials reproduced by Luciano Petech, which would tend to show that Captains were not considered as government officials, see Petech 1973, p. 12. At the same time, British sources say that *brgya dpon* and *zhal ngo* (Bell 1906, p. 22) are respectively of the sixth and seventh rank, in the officials' rank ladder, which would suggest that they both belong to the administration.
- 21 Zur khang Bsod nams dbang chen in 1877, see Petech 1973, p. 150.
- 22 At the same rank we find also officers named *zhal ngo*, which might be a rank used earlier. There were also civil *zhal ngo*.
- 23 Interview with Zla ba tshe ring, Dharamsala (09/07/2011). Some descriptions of the army also comprise the officer title of Major (*me j'or*), which would be above the Corporal, and the positions of Instructor (*dge che*), and Junior instructor (*dge rgan*), see Gra ma Zla ba tshe ring 2010, p. 42-47. These titles and positions were not found in the British archives and must have been filled only with commoners. One has to take into consideration that translations of military titles are necessarily arbitrary. British sources sometimes translate *mda' dpon* by "General," "Commander," or "Colonel," and the rest of the minor positions change accordingly. Moreover, the hierarchy of these titles is not always the same in different western languages: a Captain is above a Major in the French military whereas the opposite is the case in the British system of ranks.
- 24 Richardson 1962, p. 17.
- 25 Out of the ninety-three Generals (*mda' dpon*), only seven had held a military charge before being appointed to this high command post. See Travers 2011, p. 167.
- 26 Petech [1950] 1973, p. 230. This standing army consisted of 25 000 infantry and cavalry in total, but, after Pholanas' rule, its efficiency declined (Petech [1950] 1973, p. 231). The exact circumstances of the creation of the Tibetan standing army are not yet clarified, but according to Snellgrove and Richardson: it was one of the most efficient innovations inspired by the Chinese model at this time (Snellgrove and Richardson [1968] 1995, p. 218).
- 27 Dung dkar 1991, p. 119. In Tibetan
Mda' dpon gyi 'os la ru dpon / ru dpon gyi tshab la brgya dpon / de tshab la lding dpon bcas rim bzhin 'phar dgos la / mi drag dang drung 'khor yin kyang gong bzhin gnas rim 'phar las / mtho 'dzeg byas mi chog (pa) dang / mi ser byings dmangs kyi khongs nas lding dpon gyi go sa byas mi chog pa'i srol zhiig yod tshod la / de yang phyin chad so so'i blo stobs shes 'khos sogs kyis 'pher ba yod tshe rim bzhin 'phar chog pa las / bkag 'gegs mi dgos / (Nor bu bsam 'phel 2008, p. 159).
- 28 Petech 1973, p. 204.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 126 and 246, and List of Chiefs and Leading Families 1915, p. 25.
- 30 Prince Peter of Greece and Denmark 1963, p. 445.
- 31 Interview with Blo bzang dar rgyas Zhe bo (born 'Chum bkras gling in 1933), Dharamsala (11/09/2003). See Tucci 1983, p. 126.
- 32 Interview with Bkras mthong Tshe dbang chos rgyal (born 1935), Vancouver (19/08/2010).
- 33 Interview with the late Bdud 'dul nram rgyal or George Tsha rong (1920–2011), Dehra Dun (23/08/2003), and with Blo bzang dar rgyas Zhe bo (born 'Chum bkras gling in 1933), Dharamsala (11/09/2003).
- 34 Interview with Bkras mthong Tshe dbang chos rgyal (born 1935), Vancouver (19/08/2010).
- 35 Interview with the late Bdud 'dul nram rgyal or George Tsha rong (1920–2011), Dehra Dun (23/08/2003).
- 36 Interview with Bkras mthong Tshe dbang chos rgyal (born 1935), Vancouver (19/08/2010).
- 37 Other spellings have been suggested: *rdzong rgyab gzhar 'phen* by Hugh Richardson (Richardson 1993, p. 56 and Karsten 1983, p. 125) or *rdzong rgyab zhar phen* (Goldstein 2001, p. 916). See Karsten for a discussion of the spelling (*Ibid.*).

- 38 Karsten 1983, p. 117. His sources for identifying these troops with Gushri Khan's comprise an oral communication from Pha lha Thub bstan 'od ldan, a written communication with Tshe dbang spen pa, and Tung [1980] 1996, p. 164. Quoting an oral communication he had with Heinrich Harrer, Karsten mentions nonetheless that the armour wore by cavalymen during the festivities was unlikely to have been that worn by Gushri Khan's troops but rather that worn by Central Asian Muslim soldiers, because the helmets displayed Arabic scriptures (Karsten 1983, p. 136).
- 39 *Lhasa Mission, Typescript, August 1936 (Fols. 1-13)*, p. 44 (MS. Or. Richardson 2, Bodleian Library, Oxford).
- 40 Karsten 1983, p. 118. See this article for a detailed study of the *yasor* position and the secular festivals following the Great Prayer.
- 41 Karsten 1983, p. 126.
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 LaRocca 2006, p. 6.
- 44 Richardson 1993, pp. 34-37, 44, 56-57.
- 45 Richardson 1993, p. 56 and *Lhasa letter for the week ending the 23rd March 1947 from H.E. Richardson, British Trade Agent, Gyantse and Officer in charge, British Mission, Lhasa* (IOR/L/P&S/12/4202).
- 46 Karsten 1983, p. 26.
- 47 LaRocca 2006, pp. 4, 7, 134. LaRocca also noticed this discrepancy in sources, and the absence of the spear in some descriptions (2006, p. 174).
- 48 Richardson 1993, p. 57.
- 49 Shugupa refers here to the shape of the target, whose centre was made of a ring of white leather inside a wider circle coloured black; the white leather piece would fall when hit, cf. Interview with Bkras mthong Tshe dbang chos rgyal (born 1935), Vancouver (19/08/2010).
- 50 Carnahan and Lama Kunga Rinpoche 1995, p. 31-32.
- 51 Interview with Bkras mthong Tshe dbang chos rgyal (born 1935), Vancouver (19/08/2010).
- 52 See photography "Competitor at Gyantse Gun and Arrow competition" by Arthur Hopkinson in 1927 (?) *The Tibet Album*, PRM BMH.C.31.1.
- 53 Snellgrove and Richardson [1968] 1995, p. 258.
- 54 LaRocca 2006, p. 134.
- 55 LaRocca 2006, p. 200.
- 56 Tsha rong 2006, p. 280.
- 57 *Lhasa Mission Diary for the month of May 1938 from Norbu Dhondup British Trade Agent, Yatung and Assistant to the Political Officer in Sikkim, British Mission, Lhasa, Tibet* (IOR/L/P&S/12/4193).
- 58 Anonymous interview.
- 59 Shakabpa 2010, p. 811. The author adds: "I have seen a copy of this proposal in the records of the Treasury office" (*Ibid.*, p. 843, n. 16).
- 60 Interview with Bkras mthong Tshe dbang chos rgyal (born 1935), Vancouver (19/08/2010).
- 61 Karsten 1983, p. 26. As sources for this information, the author cites Bell 1928, p. 283, Roerich 1942, p. 309, Stein 1959, p. 111, and Schäfer 1950, p. 182.
- 62 Tsarong 1995, p. 106.
- 63 See for instance Beckwith 1987. During the Empire, there was no distinction between civil and military organization and the same word *sde* referred to a district or a regiment, cf. Snellgrove and Richardson [1968] 1995, p. 32.
- 64 The divorce between European aristocracy and the military profession happened at the turn of the 17th century (Schalk 1996).

Pour citer cet article

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Abstract / Résumé

Based on autobiographical written and oral accounts by Tibetan aristocrats, this article aims to discuss the Horse-Riding and Target-Shooting Contest for Lay Officials (*drung 'khor rtsal rgyugs*). Its origins, its evolutions during the first half of the 20th century, and its significance help to understand the link between the Tibetan aristocracy and the military domain. Though the Tibetan aristocracy was mainly an administrative elite and can therefore not be described as exercising a “defensive function” during this period, there are elements indicating a privileged relationship with the army. The permanence of this compulsory contest in the 20th century might be explained by its symbolic efficiency in linking the aristocracy to Tibet's military glorious past and to a past probably, more warlike identity.

Keywords : target-shooting, ceremony, horseriding, military, weapons, army, aristocracy, nobility, history

La compétition de tir à cheval des fonctionnaires laïcs (*drung 'khor rtsal rgyugs*) : réflexions sur l'identité militaire de l'aristocratie tibétaine au début du XX^e siècle

Cet article fondé sur des récits autobiographiques oraux et écrits de nobles tibétains étudie la Compétition de tir à cheval des fonctionnaires laïcs (*drung 'khor rtsal rgyugs*), ses origines, ses évolutions pendant la première moitié du XX^e siècle, et son importance pour comprendre la relation entre la noblesse tibétaine et le domaine guerrier. Bien que la noblesse tibétaine fût principalement une élite administrative, ne pouvant donc être décrite comme exerçant une fonction défensive pendant la période étudiée, certains éléments indiquent une relation privilégiée avec l'armée. La permanence de cette compétition obligatoire au XX^e siècle peut s'expliquer par son efficacité symbolique à lier la noblesse à un passé militaire glorieux du Tibet et à une identité probablement plus guerrière dans le passé.

Mots clés : armes, armée, militaire, cérémonie, tir, équitation, noblesse, aristocratie, histoire

Géographique : Tibet

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